

Library Services to Community Users: Current Practices of Urban and Metropolitan Universities

Wanda V. Dole and J. B. Hill

Abstract

This paper describes one of the ways in which the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) makes a difference in neighborhoods, cities, and regions by extending library privileges to community users. It reports the results of a study of the services that CUMU libraries provide to community users.

All academic libraries have as their core missions to serve the students, faculty, and staff of their institutions; nevertheless, a great majority also serves to varying degrees unaffiliated users from the local community. While historically there have been periods of both openness to and wariness of the community, today academic libraries, especially those at metropolitan and urban universities, are increasingly committed to assisting their respective communities in the intellectual and cultural development of the citizenry through the development and provision of library services, programs, and partnerships.

Community Users and Academic Libraries

External or community users have been defined as “individuals who have no affiliation with the institution as students, faculty, alumni or members of the governing board, and individuals affiliated with an institution through a consortium agreement for reciprocal borrowing” (Russell et al. 1992) or simply “just about anyone who is *not* affiliated with the college or university as students, staff, and faculty” (Wilson 2005).

Academic librarians have frequently written about the need or lack of need for extending library services to unaffiliated community users. The discussion of pros and cons of academic libraries providing services to community users has been ongoing since the 1950s. (See Courtney 2001 for a discussion summary.) There have been relatively few quantitative studies of the actual provision of such services; Courtney (2003) describes previous local, state, regional, and national surveys conducted to identify policies and practices. The major surveys include a 1964 survey of 1,100 academic libraries by the American Library Association’s Association of College and Research Libraries (Josey 1967), a 1989 survey of urban and metropolitan academic libraries (Russell 1992) and a 2001 survey of academic libraries (Courtney 2003).

The 1964 Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) survey revealed that 94 percent of these libraries provided community users with physical access to facilities and 85 percent provided borrowing privileges. Russell's 1989 survey of libraries at twenty six large, public, urban universities reported similar results (Russell 1992): 94 percent of the libraries provided community borrowers with access to reference services and collections. In addition, 50 percent charged the general public a fee ranging from \$25 to \$125 for borrowing privileges. Russell's survey was prompted by a concern that public urban universities faced unique demands. As urban institutions, their missions often included serving the needs of the general public, but their budgets were based on student enrollment. No funding was specifically provided to support extending services and collections to community borrowers.

Courtney's 2001 survey of 814 academic libraries had similar results. Almost forty years after the ACRL survey, a great majority (96 percent) of U.S. academic libraries still provided community users with physical access to facilities, 80 percent also provided community users with computer access, and 77 percent provided at least some community users with borrowing privileges (Courtney 2003). Most of the universities in Courtney's survey (57.8 percent) were private and less than a third (31.3 percent) were located in urban metropolitan areas.

UALR and Community Users

The University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) is a Carnegie doctoral research university (DRU). Established in 1927 as a junior college, in 1957 the university became a four-year institution called Little Rock University, and a member of the University of Arkansas System in 1969. Within this system, UALR is state supported and operationally separate. UALR currently enrolls over 12,000 students and offers a wide range of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs through the doctorate in humanities, social sciences, sciences, business, education, and professional studies.

As a public metropolitan university, UALR serves a diverse, non-traditional student population. In fact, 56 percent of students are twenty-five years or older, 47 percent only attend part-time, and 92 percent commute. Approximately 70 percent of the students are transfer students, having attended one or more other institution before enrolling at the university.

Ottenheimer Library serves the UALR campus with a full-time staff of thirty-one workers; a collection of approximately 512,000 volumes; 49,000 serials; and an overall operating budget of nearly \$4.8 million. In addition, the library also serves as a partial depository of U.S. federal documents serving the central Arkansas region.

An earlier study (Dole and Hill 2011) examined user records from the integrated library system and the computer logon/print management system to identify community users and the results of the Ottenheimer Library's discontinuing fees for access to library

collections and services. This study found that discontinuing fees and liberalizing circulation policies significantly increased the number of community borrowers.

The study identified two distinct groups of community users: “borrowers” who check out circulating materials from the collection and “computer users” who use library computers to access databases, e-mail and the Internet. Interestingly, there was very little overlap between the two groups, as only 15 percent of community users were borrowers who also held computer accounts.

Survey of CUMU Libraries

The authors wanted to learn if the findings of previous studies about community users in academic libraries would be true of urban and metropolitan university libraries in 2011, and if Courtney’s 2001 survey could be replicated. After reviewing the literature, they drafted a fourteen-question instrument based on previous surveys. They revised the questions for electronic distribution via Survey Monkey, pre-tested them at three university libraries, and obtained permission to administer the survey from UALR’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

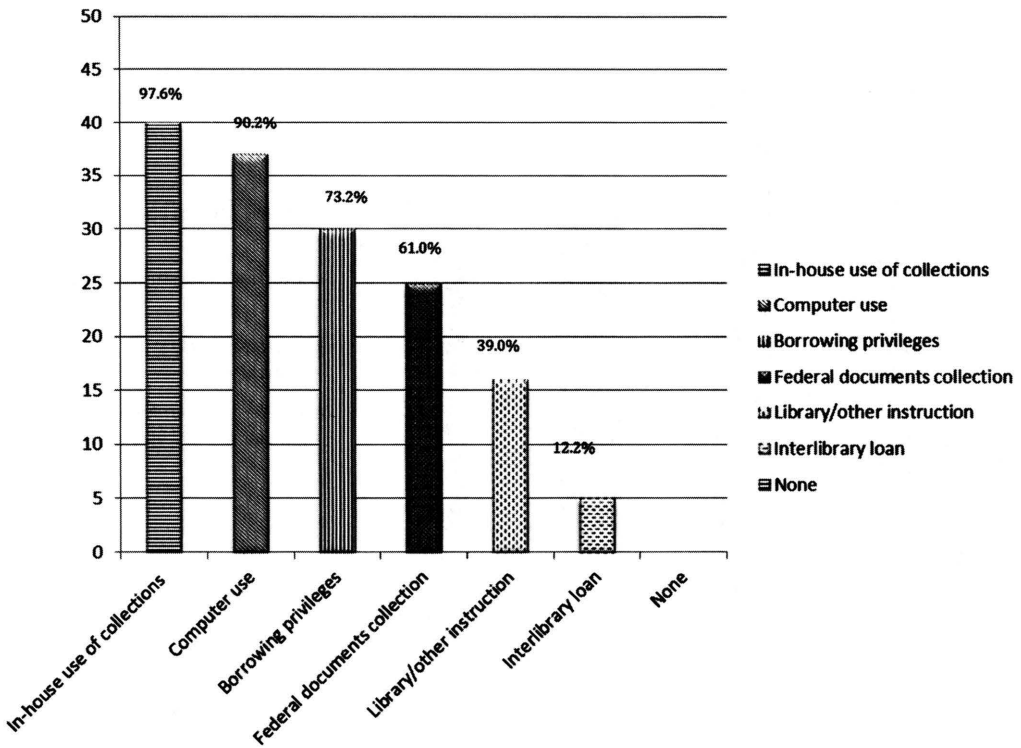
The authors created a list of e-mail addresses of deans and directors of CUMU libraries. They tested the validity of these e-mail addresses by sending an announcement of the forthcoming survey to these addresses. None of the announcements were returned as undeliverable.

The fourteen-question survey was sent to the deans and directors of sixty-five U.S.-based CUMU libraries on September 8, 2011. Two follow-up reminders were sent on September 16 and 27, 2011. Forty-two of the surveyed CUMU library deans/directors responded (65 percent). A discussion of the survey responses follows.

The universities of the responding deans/directors (95 percent) were overwhelmingly educated at master’s level or above (63 percent at doctoral level, 34 percent at master’s level, 3 percent at baccalaureate level). Most (55.3 percent) of these universities were mid-sized with a student enrollment of between 5,000 and 20,000; 26.3 percent had enrollments 20,000 or greater; and 18.4 percent were smaller institutions with enrollments of 5,000 or less.

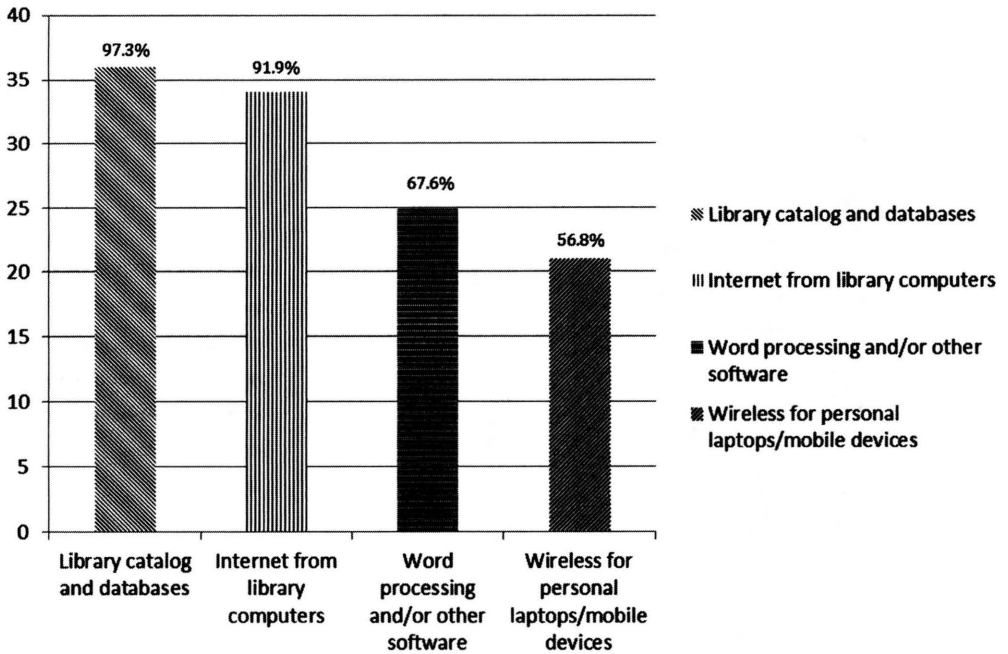
All CUMU library deans/directors who responded to the survey reported that their libraries provide some level of services to community users (see Figure 1). All but one library allow community users to physically use the library and its collections. Many libraries provide access to a U.S. government documents collection (a requirement for federal depository libraries). Most also allow users to check out materials from their collection. A smaller number offer interlibrary loan privileges to extend access to other libraries’ collections. Additionally, a significant number of libraries provide instruction to community users and groups. This instruction is typically offered to high school groups and is often viewed as a university recruitment tool.

Figure 1. Services CUMU Libraries Provide to Community Users.



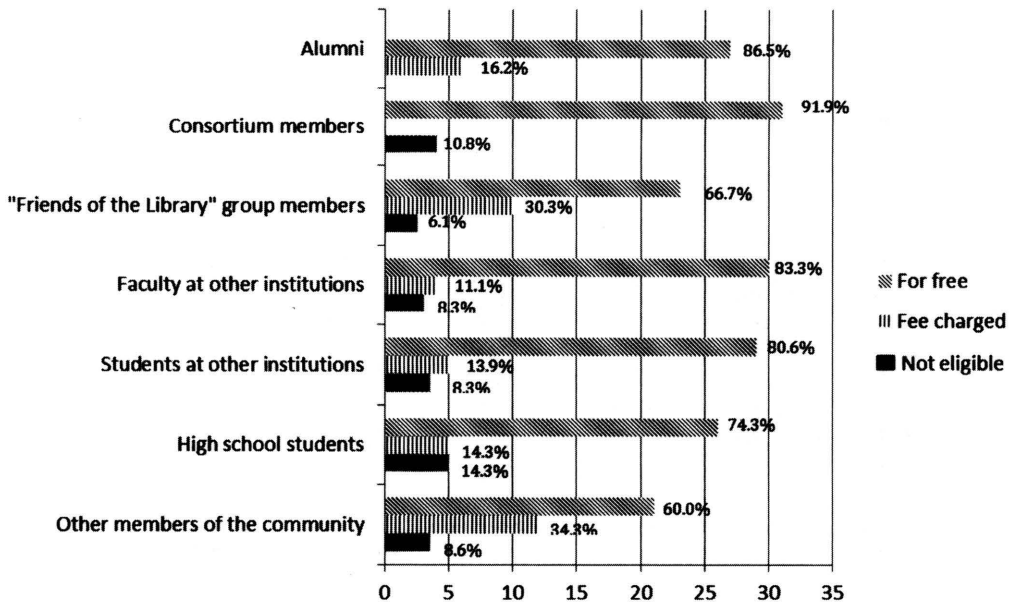
Almost all responding libraries provide some level of computer access to community users (see Figure 2). All but one library provide access to the library catalog and databases. All but three libraries provide access to the Internet. Approximately two-thirds of the libraries provide users with word processing and other common productivity software. The majority also provide community users with wireless access. Network and computer security is addressed in a numerous ways. Most libraries either do not require authentication (29.7 percent) or they provide a general logon for guest users (45.9 percent). Only 24 percent require that each user have an individual user-specific logons.

Figure 2. Computer Access for Community Users.



CUMU libraries provide a variety of services to a range of community users. However, many differentiate according to the type of user, limiting both free and fee-based services accordingly (see Figure 3). Libraries are most likely to extend free services to visitors from other universities within the library's consortium and members of the university alumni. Faculty and students from other institutions are also commonly given services and privileges. General unaffiliated users are the least likely to be granted library privileges (either free or for a fee).

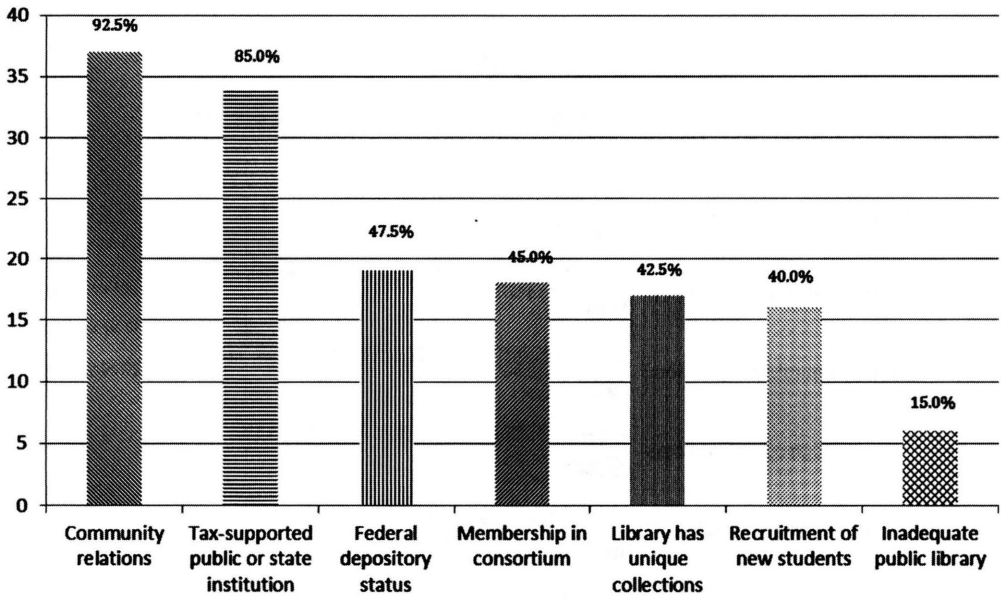
Figure 3. Types of Community Users Served.



Slightly more than half of the CUMU libraries charge their community users a fee for one or more services. Libraries that charge fees generally do so as a means of cost recovery. Only 8 percent of libraries charge fees to limit or discourage use. While most do not intend to limit use by charging fees, a study at UALR indicates that even a relatively small charge can decrease the level of use by community users (Dole and Hill 2011).

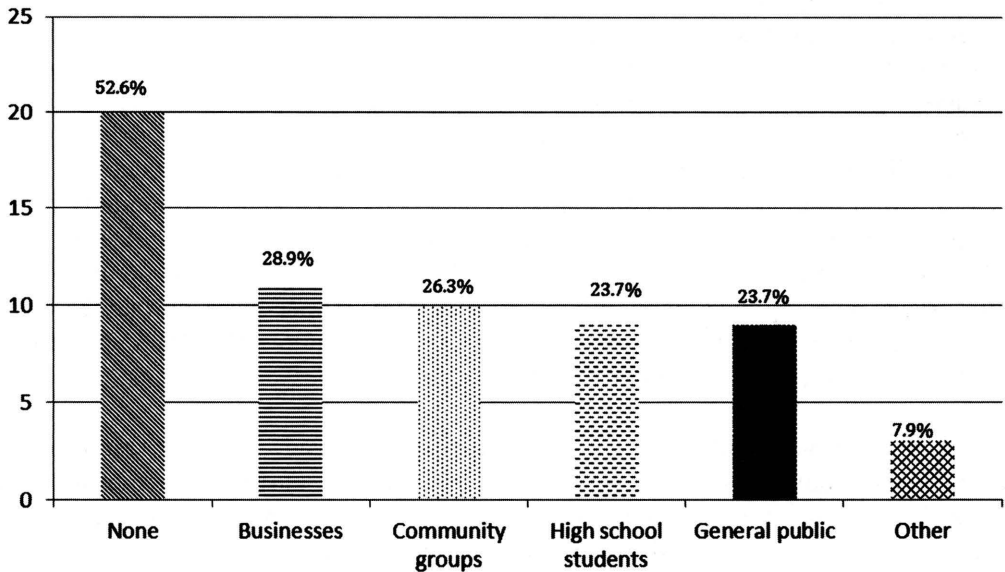
CUMU library deans/directors provide numerous reasons for offering library privileges to community users (see Figure 4). The primary reasons are the desire for good community relations or the need to do so as a public tax-supported institution. Other reasons include a contractual obligation as a federal depository library or as a consortium member. Furthermore, 40 percent of responding libraries also indicate that student recruitment is a reason for offering library privileges to members of the community.

Figure 4. Reasons for Providing Services to Community Users.



While CUMU libraries provide a variety of services for community users and groups, most engage in little or no marketing of these services (see Figure 5). It can be assumed that the lack of marketing may limit use of the library by community groups. The survey did not solicit quantitative data on the use of the library by the community; however, 27.5 percent of deans/directors reported an increase in use by the community as a result of the 2008 recession.

Figure 5. Outreach Efforts to Specific Community User Groups.



In response to open-ended questions, the dean/directors reported a number of perceived benefits to offering library privileges for community users, such as good public relations and improved community contacts. They cited benefits to the university (increases in enrollment and campus/community grants), the library (increases membership in “Friends of the Library” organizations, attendance at library events, and donation of specialized library collections), and the community (workforce and economic development).

The dean/directors also reported a number of perceived costs or disadvantages of offering services and privileges to community users. These negative consequences include the loss of materials, the competition of community users with students for limited space and resources, increased staff time required to provide services, requirements of computer setup and maintenance, and the presence of “undesirable” users whose behavior increases the library’s cost of security and cleaning.

Comparison to Previous Study

This study investigated if the findings of previous studies about community users in academic libraries would be true of urban and metropolitan university libraries in 2011, and if Courtney's 2001 survey instrument could be replicated. Results indicated that the survey questions Courtney developed for a broad cross-section of academic libraries could be used for a study limited to urban and metropolitan university libraries. The response rate (65 percent) was the same and many of the actual responses were similar. Respondents in both surveys reported giving community users building access to collections and services (CUMU 98 percent; Courtney 88.9 percent) and borrowing privileges (CUMU 73 percent; Courtney 77.2 percent). Respondents to both surveys ranked good community relations (CUMU 92 percent; Courtney 25.4 percent) and public tax-supported status of the parent institution (CUMU 85 percent; Courtney 22.2 percent) as the top reasons for extending access and services.

There were significant differences in the populations surveyed. All of the respondents to the CUMU study, but less than a third (31.3 percent) of Courtney's were from urban metropolitan universities. The majority of the study's respondents (94.9 percent) were from public universities; only 42.1 percent of Courtney's were from public universities. The universities responding to this study (95 percent) were overwhelmingly at master's level or above (63 percent at doctoral level, 34 percent at master's level, 3 percent at baccalaureate level). Respondents to Courtney's study were primarily from undergraduate institutions (37.7 percent).

Conclusion

The response rate and results of this study were similar to those of previous studies of academic libraries and community users. Libraries at urban and metropolitan universities overwhelmingly provide library services to unaffiliated members of the community. These services are offered at little cost to the institutions and are generally provided to users for free or at a nominal charge. Library deans and directors perceive the provision of services to be an obligation, opportunity, and source of potential benefits; however, it should be noted that while some measurable benefits exist, they are generally small. Nevertheless, CUMU libraries help fulfill a community need and assist their institutions in their broader mission to serve as local and regional resources that enhance the communities in which they serve.

References

- Courtney, Nancy. 2001. "Barbarians at the Gates: A Half-Century of Unaffiliated Users in Academic Libraries." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27 (6): 473–480.
- Courtney, Nancy. 2003. "Unaffiliated Users' Access to Academic Libraries: a Survey." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 29 (1): 3–7.
- Dole, Wanda, and J. B. Hill. 2011. "Community Users in North American Academic Libraries." *New Library World* 112 (¾): 41–149.

Josey, E. J., George C. Elser, Edward C. Heintz, Edward A. Howard, Barbara Lamont, Richard C. Quick, and John E. Scott. 1967. "Community Use of Academic Libraries: A Symposium." *College and Research Libraries* 28: 184–202.

Russell, Ralph E., Carolyn E. Robison, James E. Prather, and Christina E. Carlson. 1992. "External User Access to Academic Libraries in Urban/Metropolitan Areas." In *Academic Libraries in Urban and Metropolitan Areas: A Management Handbook*, edited by Gerald McCabe, 27–32. New York: Greenwood Press.

Wilson, Terrie. 2005. "The Community User in the Academic Art Library." *Art Documentation* 24 (2): 38–42.

Author Information

Wanda V. Dole, Dean Emeritus of UALR's Ottenheimer Library, is active in the American Library Association (ALA) and International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) committees, most recently serving on ALA Council, Committee on Research and Statistics and Library Research Roundtable and IFLA Section on Statistics and Evaluation. Her research interests include assessment, strategic planning, and professional ethics.

J. B. Hill, Director of Public Services at Ottenheimer Library, is active in the American Library Association (ALA) and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), most recently serving on the ACRL Standards and Accreditation Committee. His research interests include assessment and the application of emerging technologies to library operations.

Wanda V. Dole
Ottenheimer Library
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
2801 South University Avenue
Little Rock, AR 72204
E-mail: wvdole@ualr.edu
Telephone: 501-569-8803
Fax: 501-569-8814

J. B. Hill
Ottenheimer Library
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
2801 South University Avenue
Little Rock, AR 72204
E-mail: jbhill@ualr.edu
Telephone: 501-569-8808
Fax: 501-569-8814